



Start of Is Imogene Coca Jewish? What about Carl Reiner?

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IS IMOGENE COCA JEWISH? WHAT ABOUT CARL REINER?

New Yorkers take comedy seriously. Top Jewish funnymen have deluxe sandwiches named after them at uptown delis and don't need to take a number at deli counters--they're just pushed to the front of the line.

When I was growing up in New York's Queens in the Fifties, my parents worked long hours in their store, Sam's Luncheonette. It was a grueling business but one relief from it was watching comedy on TV on Saturday nights.

My father, with his dark hair and black eyes, was still haunted by things that had happened to him in Germany before the three of us came to America in 1938. Even so, he nearly fell out of his chair onto the floor laughing every Saturday night during "Your Show of Shows," especially when Caesar mimicked Germans.

When my father laughed at Caesar, his whole body laughed--his stomach, elbows, and all. Between laughing spells, he kept asking who besides Caesar was Jewish. "Is Imogene Coca Jewish?" he asked often, finding it hard to believe that anyone so funny could be anything but Jewish. "But Carl Reiner is Jewish," he

said, with some relief. "And Howard Morris is Jewish, too," he said as Reiner lifted up the skinny Morris to carry him offstage.

Everyone knew Jackie Gleason wasn't Jewish, but we never missed his show anyway because my mother's cousin Marvin was his top writer. Whenever we watched Gleason's show we waited until the credits came on. When the name Marvin Marx flashed across the screen, we all said, "There it is," and turned off the TV.

My father laughed uncontrollably whenever his favorite Jewish comedian, Jack Benny, did this routine: A holdup man points a gun at Benny, demanding, "Your money or your life." Benny stands there for a while, not saying anything. The holdup man says impatiently, "I said your money or your life." There's a long pause, then Benny says, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

My father liked Groucho, who used to say, "When I came to this country I didn't have a dime in my pocket. Now I have a dime in my pocket." He laughed at a whole cackle of Jewish comedians of the Golden Age of Comedy: Jack Carter, Ed Wynn, Milton Berle, George Burns, Alan King, Myron Cohen, Eddie Cantor, Sam Levenson, Henny Youngman, Morey Amsterdam.

My father liked to say funny things himself, but once I saw him get into trouble because of poor timing.

He had just heard the joke about two unsuccessful businessmen, one of whom had collected insurance money for a fire while the other had collected twice as much for a flood. The first asked the second, "How do you make a flood?"

Soon after that, while my father and I were in a lamp store, the owner told us he was reducing prices to get rid of

merchandise because his basement was flooded. My father asked him, "How do you make a flood?"

The angry owner actually pushed him out of the store.

My father couldn't understand why the man got so mad; he thought the guy had no sense of humor.

When he had time, my father read the six New York dailies on his newsstand. He particularly liked two opposing Jewish columnists: liberal Max Lerner of the New York Post and conservative Walter Lippmann of the New York Herald Tribune.

Although he hardly ever went farther from home than down the block for a haircut, he liked to read the Jewish columnist Walter Winchell to follow the doings of prominent Jews like Billy Rose, owner of the Diamond Horseshoe; restaurateur "Toots" Shor; and Georgie Jessel, "Toastmaster General" of the United States. For a long time he followed the doings of Shirley Temple, convinced she was Jewish; it took a lot of arguing to convince him she wasn't.

After my parents sold their luncheonette, they finally had the time to go for a long walk together every evening after supper. My father, who never had much patience, used to walk so far ahead of my mother that neighbors often asked her, "Mrs. Bloch, did you know that your husband is out walking, too?"

When he became housebound with a stroke, my father turned into a news junkie, reading newspapers while listening to news on the radio and TV, all at the same time. In politics, he didn't care who was Jewish; he loved Harry Truman, distrusted Henry Kissinger. Despite his vast store of knowledge, he never

felt smart. "Why do you always say you're not smart?" I asked him when he was 70. "Julius was the smart one," he said of a long-dead older brother.

One day in 1980, when my father was 79, while I was visiting my parents in Queens, my father fainted and was rushed to the hospital by ambulance.

I went to see him as soon as visiting hours permitted. His dark eyes looked so sad. Because he couldn't talk, maybe from another stroke, I tried to cheer him up by telling him which doctors walking by looked Jewish and which didn't. He seemed only mildly interested.

Instead, his attention went to two tiny leaves that I had discarded on the night table next to his bed. They were leaves I had inadvertently pulled from a hedge right outside the hospital. He pointed to them, sort of asking me what they were.

"I brought you flowers," I said.

He burst out laughing, the old Sid Caesar laugh, but quieter, and gave me a great big hug.

Later that night, after I left, his heart gave out and he died.

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**End of Is Imogene Coca Jewish?
What about Carl Reiner?**
